

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

MICHAEL BUXBAUM,

Plaintiff,

-against-

ACTING FAMILY COURT JUDGE KEITH  
CORNELL; THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF  
ROCKLAND COUNTY,

Defendants.

21-CV-9553 (LTS)

ORDER OF DISMISSAL  
WITH LEAVE TO REPLEAD

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN, Chief United States District Judge:

Plaintiff Michael Buxbaum, who is appearing *pro se*, filed this complaint on November 17, 2021, without the filing fees or a request to proceed *in forma pauperis* (IFP), that is, without prepayment of fees. By order dated November 18, 2021, the Court directed Plaintiff, within thirty days, to either pay the filing fees or submit a completed and signed IFP application. (ECF No. 2.) Plaintiff paid the filing fees on November 29, 2021. For the reasons set forth below, the Court dismisses the complaint, but grants Plaintiff thirty days' leave to allege facts that state a claim for relief against proper defendants.

**STANDARD OF REVIEW**

The Court has the authority to dismiss a complaint, even when the plaintiff has paid the filing fees, if it determines that the action is frivolous, *Fitzgerald v. First E. Seventh Tenants Corp.*, 221 F.3d 362, 363-64 (2d Cir. 2000) (per curiam) (citing *Pillay v. INS*, 45 F.3d 14, 16-17 (2d Cir. 1995) (per curiam) (holding that Court of Appeals has inherent authority to dismiss frivolous appeal)), or that the Court lacks subject matter jurisdiction, *Ruhrgas AG v. Marathon Oil Co.*, 526 U.S. 574, 583 (1999). Moreover, the court “has the power to dismiss a complaint sua sponte for failure to state a claim,” *Leonhard v. United States*, 633 F.2d 599, 609 n. 11 (2d

Cir. 1980), so long as the plaintiff is given notice and “an opportunity to be heard.” *Thomas v. Scully*, 943 F.2d 259, 260 (2d Cir.1991) (per curiam); *see also Perez v. Ortiz*, 849 F.2d 793, 797 (2d Cir. 1988); Wright & Miller, *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 1357, at 301 & n. 3. The Court is obliged, however, to construe *pro se* pleadings liberally, *Harris v. Mills*, 572 F.3d 66, 72 (2d Cir. 2009), and interpret them to raise the “strongest [claims] that they suggest,” *Triestman v. Fed. Bureau of Prisons*, 470 F.3d 471, 474-75 (2d Cir. 2006) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (emphasis in original).

Although *pro se* litigants enjoy the Court’s “special solicitude,” *Ruotolo v. I.R.S.*, 28 F.3d 6, 8 (2d Cir. 1994) (per curiam), their pleadings must comply with Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which requires a complaint to include enough facts to state a claim for relief “that is plausible on its face.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)). To review a complaint for plausibility, the Court accepts all well-pleaded factual allegations as true and draws all reasonable inferences in the pleader’s favor. *Id.* (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555). But the Court need not accept “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action,” which are essentially legal conclusions. *Id.* at 678 (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555). As set forth in *Iqbal*:

[T]he pleading standard Rule 8 announces does not require detailed factual allegations, but it demands more than an unadorned, the-defendant-unlawfully-harmed-me accusation. A pleading that offers labels and conclusions or a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do. Nor does a complaint suffice if it tenders naked assertions devoid of further factual enhancement.

*Id.* (internal citations, quotation marks, and alteration omitted). After separating legal conclusions from well-pleaded factual allegations, the court must determine whether those facts make it plausible – not merely possible – that the pleader is entitled to relief. *Id.*

## BACKGROUND

Plaintiff brings this complaint against Acting Family Court Judge Keith Cornell and the Legal Aid Society of Rockland County, alleging that Defendants are violating his due process rights in the Rockland County Family Court. He asserts that the family court issued an order that: (1) prohibits him from communicating with his child, who is almost 17 years of age; (2) orders him to remain 100 yards away from his child; and (3) prohibits him from attending his child's soccer games. (ECF No. 1 at 5.).

Plaintiff brings this complaint seeking to have the family court case assigned to “Referee Dean Richardson-Mendolsohn, who is the referee assigned for many years to the custody and visitation matters for the parties.” (*Id.*) He also seeks to have this Court prohibit “Surrogate Judge Keith Cornell from acting as a family court judge regarding this family court matter,” and to “assign a new attorney for the child.” (*Id.*) While Plaintiff’s requests for relief suggest that the proceedings in the Rockland County Family Court may be pending, the status of these proceedings is unclear.

## DISCUSSION

### A. Judicial Immunity

Plaintiff’s claims against Acting Family Court Judge Keith Cornell must be dismissed. Judges are absolutely immune from suit for damages for any actions taken within the scope of their judicial responsibilities. *Mireles v. Waco*, 502 U.S. 9, 11 (1991). Generally, “acts arising out of, or related to, individual cases before the judge are considered judicial in nature.” *Bliven v. Hunt*, 579 F.3d 204, 210 (2d Cir. 2009). “Even allegations of bad faith or malice cannot overcome judicial immunity.” *Id.* (citations omitted). This is because, “[w]ithout insulation from liability, judges would be subject to harassment and intimidation . . .” *Young v. Selsky*, 41 F.3d 47, 51 (2d Cir. 1994). In addition, as amended in 1996, section 1983 provides that “in any action

brought against a judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer's judicial capacity, injunctive relief shall not be granted unless a declaratory decree was violated, or declaratory relief was unavailable." 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

There are only two sets of circumstances in which judicial immunity does not apply: (1) when a judge takes action that is outside the judge's judicial capacity; or (2) when a judge takes action, that, although judicial in nature, is in the absence of all jurisdiction. *Mireles*, 502 U.S. at 11-12. Generally, "acts arising out of, or related to, individual cases before the judge are considered judicial in nature." *Bliven*, 579 F.3d at 210. "[T]he scope of [a] judge's jurisdiction must be construed broadly where the issue is the immunity of the judge." *Stump v. Sparkman*, 435 U.S. 349, 356 (1978).

Plaintiff does not allege any facts showing that Acting Family Court Judge Keith Cornell acted beyond the scope of his judicial responsibilities or outside of his jurisdiction. *See Mireles*, 509 U.S. at 11-12. Because Plaintiff sues Judge Keith Cornell for "acts arising out of, or related to, individual cases before him," he is immune from suit for such claims. *Bliven*, 579 F.3d at 210. The Court therefore dismisses Plaintiff's claims Judge Keith Cornell under the doctrine of judicial immunity. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(iii) and, consequently, as frivolous, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Mills v. Fischer*, 645 F.3d 176, 177 (2d Cir. 2011) ("Any claim dismissed on the ground of absolute judicial immunity is 'frivolous' for purposes of [the in forma pauperis statute]."); *Montero v. Travis*, 171 F.3d 757, 760 (2d Cir. 1999) ("A complaint will be dismissed as 'frivolous' when 'it is clear that the defendants are immune from suit.'" (quoting *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989))).

## **B. The Legal Aid Society of Rockland County**

Plaintiff's claims against the Legal Aid Society of Rockland County must also be dismissed. A claim for relief under § 1983 must allege facts showing that each defendant acted

under the color of a state “statute, ordinance, regulation, custom or usage.” 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Private parties are therefore not generally liable under the statute. *Sykes v. Bank of America*, 723 F.3d 399, 406 (2d Cir. 2013) (citing *Brentwood Acad. v. Tenn. Secondary Sch. Athletic Ass’n*, 531 U.S. 288, 295 (2001)); *see also Ciambriello v. Cnty. of Nassau*, 292 F.3d 307, 323 (2d Cir. 2002) (“[T]he United States Constitution regulates only the Government, not private parties.”). Absent special circumstances suggesting concerted action between an attorney and a state representative, *see Nicholas v. Goord*, 430 F.3d 652, 656 n.7 (2d Cir. 2005) (citing *Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co.*, 398 U.S. 144, 152 (1970)), the representation of a defendant by counsel in state criminal proceedings does not constitute the degree of state involvement or interference necessary to establish a claim under § 1983, regardless of whether that attorney is privately retained, court-appointed, or employed as a public defender. *See Bourdon v. Loughren*, 386 F.3d 88, 90 (2d Cir. 2004) (citing *Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 324-25 (1981)); *see also Schnabel v. Abramson*, 232 F.3d 83, 87 (2d Cir. 2000) (holding that legal aid organization ordinarily is not a state actor for purposes of § 1983). Here, the Legal Aid Society of Rockland County is a private party that is not alleged to work for any state or other government body. Accordingly, Plaintiff has not stated a claim against this Defendant under Section 1983.

### **C. Interference with State-Court Proceedings**

Furthermore, the relief Plaintiff seeks is precluded by the Anti-Injunction Act and the domestic relations abstention doctrine.

#### **1. Anti-Injunction Act**

The federal Anti-Injunction Act provides that “[a] court of the United States may not grant an injunction to stay proceedings in a State court except as expressly authorized by Act of Congress, or where necessary in aid of its jurisdiction, or to protect or effectuate its judgments.” 28 U.S.C. § 2283. “[A]ny injunction against state court proceedings otherwise proper . . . must

be based on one of the specific statutory exceptions [in the Act] if it is to be upheld.” *Atl. Coast Line R.R. Co. v. Bhd. of Locomotive Eng’rs*, 398 U.S. 281, 287 (1970). State-court proceedings “should normally be allowed to continue unimpaired by intervention of the lower federal courts, with relief from error, if any, through the state appellate courts and ultimately [the United States Supreme Court].” *Id.* The Act “is an absolute prohibition against any injunction of any state-court proceedings, unless the injunction falls within one of the three specifically defined exceptions in the Act.” *Vendo Co. v. Lektro-Vend Corp.*, 433 U.S. 623, 630 (1977).

Plaintiff has alleged nothing to suggest that one of the exceptions to the Act’s prohibition against federal-court intervention into state-court proceedings applies or allows that relief. The Court therefore dismisses Plaintiff’s claims for injunctive relief as prohibited by the Anti-Injunction Act.

## **2. Domestic Relations Abstention Doctrine**

The domestic relations abstention doctrine requires this Court to abstain from exercising federal question jurisdiction over domestic relations issues, such as those implicated in Plaintiff’s claims. In 1990, in *American Airlines, Inc. v. Block*, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit instructed federal district courts to abstain from exercising federal question jurisdiction over claims involving domestic relations issues, so long as those claims could be fully and fairly determined in the state courts. *See* 905 F.2d 12, 14 (2d Cir. 1990) (holding that federal district court should abstain from exercising its federal-question jurisdiction over claims in which it is “asked to grant a divorce or annulment, determine support payments, or award custody of a child . . . .” (internal quotation marks and citation omitted)).

Where a federal district court is “asked to grant a divorce or annulment, determine support payments, or award custody of a child,” the court should abstain from exercising its jurisdiction over such claims if “there is no obstacle to their full and fair determination in [the]

state courts.” *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted); *see Ankenbrandt v. Richards*, 504 U.S. 689, 703 (1992) (recognizing a domestic relations exception to federal district courts’ diversity jurisdiction of state court claims involving divorce, custody, and support).

In *Deem v. DiMella-Deem*, the Second Circuit held that federal district courts should abstain from exercising federal question jurisdiction of such claims as well. *See* 941 F.3d 618, 621 (2d Cir. 2019). Thus, “[a]lthough the domestic relations ‘*exception*’ to subject matter jurisdiction recognized by the Supreme Court in *Ankenbrandt* . . . does not apply in federal-question cases, the domestic relations *abstention* doctrine articulated in *American Airlines* does.” *Id.* (emphasis in original).

Here, Plaintiff asks this Court to intervene in family court proceedings in Rockland County. Plaintiff’s allegations do not suggest, however, that he was denied a full and fair hearing in the state courts. The Court must therefore abstain from exercising its federal question jurisdiction over Plaintiff’s claims arising from the issuance of state-court orders and their enforcement.<sup>1</sup> *See Deem*, 941 F.3d at 621-25 (affirming *sua sponte* dismissal under domestic relations abstention doctrine).

#### **D. Leave to Replead**

Plaintiff proceeds in this matter without the benefit of an attorney. District courts generally should grant a self-represented plaintiff an opportunity to amend a complaint to cure its defects, unless amendment would be futile. *See Hill v. Curcione*, 657 F.3d 116, 123-24 (2d Cir.

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<sup>1</sup> If there are proceedings pending in state court, Plaintiff’s claims may also be barred by *Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971). When a family court proceeding that is “akin to a criminal proceeding” is ongoing, federal courts may be required to abstain, under the doctrine articulated in *Younger*, from adjudicating claims that interfere with such proceedings. *See Sprint Commc’n, Inc. v. Jacobs*, 571 U.S. 69, 79 (2013) (citing *Moore v. Sims*, 442 U.S. 415, 419-20 (1979) (applying *Younger* abstention where parents challenged ongoing proceedings to terminate their parental rights)).

2011); *Salahuddin v. Cuomo*, 861 F.2d 40, 42 (2d Cir. 1988). Indeed, the Second Circuit has cautioned that district courts “should not dismiss [a *pro se* complaint] without granting leave to amend at least once when a liberal reading of the complaint gives any indication that a valid claim might be stated.” *Cuoco v. Moritsugu*, 222 F.3d 99, 112 (2d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Gomez v. USAA Fed. Sav. Bank*, 171 F.3d 794, 795 (2d Cir. 1999)). The Court is doubtful that Plaintiff can cure the deficiencies in the complaint, but in an abundance of caution, the Court grants Plaintiff thirty days’ leave to allege facts that state a claim for relief against proper defendants. The amended complaint must contain a short and plain statement showing that he is entitled to relief. The Court strongly encourages Plaintiff to bear in mind the legal principles explained above when preparing the amended complaint.

Plaintiff must provide a short and plain statement of the relevant facts supporting each claim against each defendant, but Plaintiff is not permitted to name as a defendant any defendant against whom Plaintiff’s claims have been dismissed by this order. If Plaintiff has an address for any named defendant, Plaintiff must provide it. Plaintiff should include all of the information in the amended complaint that Plaintiff wants the Court to consider in deciding whether the amended complaint states a claim for relief. That information should include:

- a) the names and titles of all relevant people;
- b) a description of all relevant events, including what each defendant did or failed to do, the approximate date and time of each event, and the general location where each event occurred;
- c) a description of the injuries Plaintiff suffered; and
- d) the relief Plaintiff seeks, such as money damages, injunctive relief, or declaratory relief.



Essentially, Plaintiff's amended complaint should tell the Court: who violated his federally protected rights and how; when and where such violations occurred; and why Plaintiff is entitled to relief.<sup>2</sup>

Because Plaintiff's amended complaint will completely replace, not supplement, the original complaint, any facts or claims that Plaintiff wants to include from the original complaint must be repeated in the amended complaint.

### CONCLUSION

The Court dismisses Plaintiff's claims against Acting Family Court Judge Keith Cornell under the doctrine of judicial immunity. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(iii).

The Court dismisses Plaintiff's claims against the Legal Aid Society of Rockland County because this Defendant is a private party. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

Plaintiff's request to have this Court intervene in the family court proceedings is barred by the Anti-Injunction Act and the domestic relations abstention doctrine.

The Court grants Plaintiff thirty days' leave to allege facts that state a claim for relief against proper defendants in an amended complaint that complies with the standards set forth above. An Amended Complaint form is attached to this order for Plaintiff's convenience.

The Clerk of Court is instructed to hold this matter open on the docket until a civil judgment is entered.

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<sup>2</sup> Plaintiff may consider contacting the New York Legal Assistance Group's (NYLAG) Legal Clinic for Pro Se Litigants in the Southern District of New York, which is a free legal clinic staffed by attorneys and paralegals to assist those who are representing themselves in civil lawsuits in this court. A copy of the flyer with details of the clinic is attached to this order. The clinic is currently available **only** by telephone.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore IFP status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *See Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962).

SO ORDERED.

Dated: May 16, 2022  
New York, New York

/s/ Laura Taylor Swain  
LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN  
Chief United States District Judge

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UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

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Write the full name of each plaintiff.

\_\_\_\_ CV \_\_\_\_  
(Include case number if one has been assigned)

-against-

**AMENDED**

**COMPLAINT**

Do you want a jury trial?

☐ Yes ☐ No

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Write the full name of each defendant. If you need more space, please write "see attached" in the space above and attach an additional sheet of paper with the full list of names. The names listed above must be identical to those contained in Section II.

**NOTICE**

The public can access electronic court files. For privacy and security reasons, papers filed with the court should therefore *not* contain: an individual's full social security number or full birth date; the full name of a person known to be a minor; or a complete financial account number. A filing may include *only*: the last four digits of a social security number; the year of an individual's birth; a minor's initials; and the last four digits of a financial account number. See Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5.2.

## I. BASIS FOR JURISDICTION

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction (limited power). Generally, only two types of cases can be heard in federal court: cases involving a federal question and cases involving diversity of citizenship of the parties. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1331, a case arising under the United States Constitution or federal laws or treaties is a federal question case. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1332, a case in which a citizen of one State sues a citizen of another State or nation, and the amount in controversy is more than \$75,000, is a diversity case. In a diversity case, no defendant may be a citizen of the same State as any plaintiff.

What is the basis for federal-court jurisdiction in your case?

- ☐ **Federal Question**
- ☐ **Diversity of Citizenship**

### A. If you checked Federal Question

Which of your federal constitutional or federal statutory rights have been violated?

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### B. If you checked Diversity of Citizenship

#### 1. Citizenship of the parties

Of what State is each party a citizen?

The plaintiff, \_\_\_\_\_, is a citizen of the State of  
(Plaintiff's name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(State in which the person resides and intends to remain.)

or, if not lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States, a citizen or subject of the foreign state of

\_\_\_\_\_.

If more than one plaintiff is named in the complaint, attach additional pages providing information for each additional plaintiff.

If the defendant is an individual:

The defendant, \_\_\_\_\_, is a citizen of the State of  
(Defendant's name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
or, if not lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States, a citizen or  
subject of the foreign state of

\_\_\_\_\_  
If the defendant is a corporation:

The defendant, \_\_\_\_\_, is incorporated under the laws of  
the State of \_\_\_\_\_

and has its principal place of business in the State of \_\_\_\_\_

or is incorporated under the laws of (foreign state) \_\_\_\_\_

and has its principal place of business in \_\_\_\_\_.

If more than one defendant is named in the complaint, attach additional pages providing  
information for each additional defendant.

## II. PARTIES

### A. Plaintiff Information

Provide the following information for each plaintiff named in the complaint. Attach additional  
pages if needed.

First Name	Middle Initial	Last Name
Street Address		
County, City	State	Zip Code
Telephone Number	Email Address (if available)	

**B. Defendant Information**

To the best of your ability, provide addresses where each defendant may be served. If the correct information is not provided, it could delay or prevent service of the complaint on the defendant. Make sure that the defendants listed below are the same as those listed in the caption. Attach additional pages if needed.

Defendant 1:

First Name	Last Name	
Current Job Title (or other identifying information)		
Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served)		
County, City	State	Zip Code

Defendant 2:

First Name	Last Name	
Current Job Title (or other identifying information)		
Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served)		
County, City	State	Zip Code

Defendant 3:

First Name	Last Name	
Current Job Title (or other identifying information)		
Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served)		
County, City	State	Zip Code

Defendant 4:

First Name

Last Name

Current Job Title (or other identifying information)

Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served)

County, City

State

Zip Code

### III. STATEMENT OF CLAIM

Place(s) of occurrence: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) of occurrence: \_\_\_\_\_

**FACTS:**

State here briefly the FACTS that support your case. Describe what happened, how you were harmed, and what each defendant personally did or failed to do that harmed you. Attach additional pages if needed.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## INJURIES:

If you were injured as a result of these actions, describe your injuries and what medical treatment, if any, you required and received.

#### IV. RELIEF

State briefly what money damages or other relief you want the court to order.



**V. PLAINTIFF'S CERTIFICATION AND WARNINGS**

By signing below, I certify to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief that: (1) the complaint is not being presented for an improper purpose (such as to harass, cause unnecessary delay, or needlessly increase the cost of litigation); (2) the claims are supported by existing law or by a nonfrivolous argument to change existing law; (3) the factual contentions have evidentiary support or, if specifically so identified, will likely have evidentiary support after a reasonable opportunity for further investigation or discovery; and (4) the complaint otherwise complies with the requirements of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11.

I agree to notify the Clerk's Office in writing of any changes to my mailing address. I understand that my failure to keep a current address on file with the Clerk's Office may result in the dismissal of my case.

Each Plaintiff must sign and date the complaint. Attach additional pages if necessary. If seeking to proceed without prepayment of fees, each plaintiff must also submit an IFP application.

Dated		Plaintiff's Signature	
First Name	Middle Initial	Last Name	
Street Address			
County, City		State	Zip Code
Telephone Number		Email Address (if available)	

I have read the Pro Se (Nonprisoner) Consent to Receive Documents Electronically:

☐ Yes    ☐ No

If you do consent to receive documents electronically, submit the completed form with your complaint. If you do not consent, please do not attach the form.